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Naming, Identity, and the Feminine in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*

What’s in a name? Naming is an intrinsic aspect of society and a key factor in ultimately shaping identity and interpersonal relationships. Not only are identities formed through familial and social roles, but also through constraints placed on individuals by the society or culture in which he or she lives. Women, specifically, have been given named roles that paint them as virginal girls, chaste and wholesome mothers, or promiscuous, often vilified, harlots. William Faulkner wrote in the early 20th century, a time in which women were gaining freedoms but were still oppressed by morality-based societal pressure. Faulkner explores the multi-faceted feminine identity through naming and language, coupled with values found in Southern patriarchal perspectives. Women, in their many forms and roles, are proven to be vital and central to societal and familial structures present in Faulkner’s novels. Female characters are used as tools; their roles and identities are defined by men, with their function being to help shape and reveal the masculine identity and perspective. In Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury*, women are marked by their language use and the male language used to describe them; their identities are shaped through roles they assume or discard while their absence results in men’s displacement and projection of those roles onto others.

Many roles these female characters take on are those prescribed to them by society and the individuals that surround them. The women in  *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury* are presented through a masculine gaze and their identities are often defined in relation to those men:

[B]oth books reverberate with the paradoxical power of women’s bodily absence and presence, of women’s silence and language. Both examine men’s desperate attempts to deal with maternal absence, to use language as replacement for mother. (Clarke 19)

These two novels explore men’s reactions to the feminine in various states, including death, absence, emotional involvement or detachment. While some individuals find replacements for mothers in other characters, symbols, or objects, the actual language used by male characters becomes like a mother to them. They use such language to shape their own experiences with the feminine through naming and describing their own female family members or maternal surrogates. The language used by male characters creates the female identity of ‘the other.’ This detachment and creation of opposition reveals the limitations of a male perspective based narrative and the use of language and naming in shaping the feminine identity.

The idea of woman being ‘other’ and being detached from society and her male counterpart is not specific to Faulkner. The use of naming to shape and create separation between genders has been explored by Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray using Plato’s *Timaeus* and the cave allegory from *Republic*. In Plato, khôra, meaning space or receptacle, is aligned and often made synonymous with the role of woman due to its treatment as the other. Derrida’s discussion on the naming of this space correlates well with the naming of women in Faulkner: “Khôra reaches us, and as the name. And when a name comes, it immediately says more than the name: the other of the name and quite simply the other” (Derrida 89). In naming this space, or in naming woman, a distance is created and the power of naming is given to the masculine, while the feminine must passively accept. While Derrida works to deconstruct the analogy between khôra and the feminine, and ultimately finds that she does not belong to the ‘race of women’ (124), Irigaray states that khôra can encompass womankind: “An ideal of truth is in fact necessary to under-lie and legitimize the metaphors, the figures used to represent the role of women, without voice, without presence” (265). Khôra is the ‘other,’ passive, voiceless, yet constantly present, much like many of the female characters in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*. In Faulkner’s work, men take the physical, corporeal aspect of the feminine, the actual woman in all of her complexities, and pare her down into easily dissected language-based roles and stereotypes, or reject her in favor of easy to manage substitutes. Naming woman and limiting her to language-based roles, combined with a male-skewed narrative, actively silences the woman’s voice and diminishes her presence, even if her character is central to the narrative.

In contrast to the voiceless female characters present in *The Sound and the Fury*, Addie and Dewey Dell from *As I Lay Dying* speak through the text, but have complex relationships with language that elevate physical aspects of the feminine and perpetuate the power of masculine language. Dewey Dell is represented by her physicality and plain speech, diminishing the importance of her language use: “Dewey Dell is all body as Darl is all language” (Roberts 202). Dewey Dell is frequently described in physical terms and Darl is often the one doing the describing: “She sets the basket into the wagon and climbs in, her leg coming long from her tightening dress: that lever which moves the world; one of that caliper which measures the length and breadth of life” (Faulkner *As I Lay Dying* 60). Her physical appearance is emphasized throughout the text, for it not only represents her feminine sexuality, but also her connections to fertility, motherhood, and natural life processes. Her tightening dress shows her maturation and pregnancy, her revealed leg is sexual in nature, and Darl’s lever metaphor conveys the process of birth, growth, reproduction, and death. In Dewey Dell’s own narrative sections, she frequently focuses on the process of becoming pregnant: “He is a big tub of guts and I am a little tub of guts and if there is not any room for anything else important in a big tub of guts, how can it be room in a little tub of guts” (Faulkner *As I Lay* 35). Her primary conflict is physical, in that she carries an unwanted pregnancy. Her use of language is seemingly simplistic and tangible, often using vivid, visceral descriptions that revolve around nature and the physical body. Though initially presented as a sister and daughter, Dewey Dell is the sexual woman and fertile mother, roles amplified by her name that, in itself, represents fertility. Unlike Caddy, she faces little resistance to her sexual activity and motherhood, perhaps because no one, other than Darl, is aware of it. Even when noting her sexuality, he is detached from it. In spite of Dewey Dell’s lack of language and the masculine cast that surrounds her, she successfully fulfills her roles, even if she does not desire them.

While Dewey Dell has the freedom to speak throughout the text, her and Addie are confined, both physically and emotionally, by their womanhood. Dewey Dell cannot rid herself of her pregnancy, a physically binding state, and cannot escape the perspectives of her brother, Darl, and other men who view her as a base, sexual being. Dewey Dell embraces her feminine sexuality and physicality whereas Addie rejects her own physical and sexual nature, instead finding power in speech, “[Addie] declared her independence in words while Dewey Dell submits to the inevitable” (Roberts 202). Dewey Dell is passive; she decides to sleep with Lafe based on the amount of cotton she gathers and relies on the pharmacist to procure her an abortion, passively accepting his sexual advances. Addie, however, actively casts off the roles she is assigned, including feminine stereotypes of loving caregiver and sexual woman. However, she still falls prey to masculine societal constructs. While she has only one section of narration, it reveals much about her character. She was once a sexual being: “I would think of him as thinking of me as dressed also in sin, he the more beautiful since the garment which he has exchanged for sin was sanctified” (Faulkner *As I Lay* 101). This is the only glimpse seen of her sexual nature, and even then, it is shrouded by a veil of sin. This fear of sin oppresses her sexual expression and controls and confines her, much like the coffin physically confines her body post-mortem. Her motherhood is similarly tainted: “the wild blood boiled away and the sound of it ceased. Then there was only the milk, warm and calm, and I lying calm in the slow silence, getting ready to clean my house” (Faulkner *As I Lay* 102). While her mothering of Jewel calms the angry blood within in her and helps prepare her for her wifely duties, the rage she feels and the sin surrounding Jewel’s conception seems to indicate that there is still a sense of hatred or tension in her tending; she seems to care more for the idea of singularly owning Jewel and having something of her own in place of the desire to shape and love a growing child and home. She is complex; she rebels against the feminine roles assigned to her. Even when given the role of corpse, she still speaks. However, in her section, she denies the weight and importance of language, seeing it as a male construction; in her use of it, she gives in to the masculine while still attempting to challenge it.

Even in Addie and Dewey Dell’s language use, language takes on a masculine tone and power which is amplified by the frequent male narration used in both novels. Just as khôra, the passive, voiceless feminine, must be named by man in order to shape and control the other, names are also given to the feminine to assert male dominance: “He said it was men invented virginity not women. Father said it’s like death: only a state in which the others are left” (Faulkner *The Sound* 78). The naming of virginity allows an opportunity for man to assert power over woman because its loss out of wedlock would create a ‘fallen woman’ who would be looked down upon in society and would be tainted by sin. The naming of a lack is frequently noted in both texts: “Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature” (Faulkner *The Sound* 116). Purity, or virginity, is shown to be a construct that is weighed more so for women. Mr. Compson has a progressive view of virginity, one that is not fully understood or accepted by his traditional Southern sons. Not only this, but virginity and sexuality are treated differently according to gender. This is reflected in Quentin’s experiences at school; his Northern school friends remark on the state of Southern male virginity:“In the South you are ashamed of being a virgin. Boys. Men. They lie about it” (Faulkner *The Sound* 78). The concept of virginity is used to control and oppress women and is also used to shame men. While a virgin woman is placed on a pedestal, one that is elevated both in society and in the eyes of God, a virgin man is seen as less virile or masculine. When this seal of virginity is broken, a woman becomes a harlot, whore, or disgrace, like Caddie, while the man is revered in his social circle.

Just as man created virginity, according to Mr. Compson, other states are also fabrications. He states that death is the absence of life and must be named by those still alive, much like Addie is named a lifeless corpse by those living even though she still speaks. Addie is skeptical about language, shown when Anse names something that doesn’t exist for him: “I knew that that word [love] was like the others; just a shape to fill a lack” (Faulkner *As I Lay* 99). In naming love, Anse takes control over emotion, something often aligned with the feminine; if he does not truly feel love for Addie and is lying, he is attempting to assert emotional power over her through language. He woos her in order to make her his wife and make her bear him children. Addie even states that Anse deceived her in some sense and perpetuated that deception through his language use. In using language to name a lack, the masculine asserts dominance over that which is deemed feminine and submissive. Addie continues: “When [Cash] was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn’t care whether there was a word for it or not” (Faulkner *As I Lay* 99). This, again, shows the masculine control over feminine roles using language. The mother did not create herself; she was created by man and given a role to fill, indicating that she must follow societal guidelines to maintain status in the family or community. The role of mother is limited to a name; Addie and Mrs. Compson are both termed mothers because they birthed children, not because they possess any motherly instincts or rearing abilities.

Like Addie, Mrs. Compson is assigned the role of mother, but hides behind a stereotype in order to distance herself from that unwanted role. Mrs. Compson finds refuge in the self-proclamation of her supposed sickness and in the title of mother, even when she is incapable of being motherly. She validates the stereotype of the weak, helpless white Southern woman, a stereotype that is guarded by her son, Jason: “He constantly reminds himself of the need to protect her, almost reveling in her helplessness” (Clarke 28). His ability to protect and provide for women increases his honor as a man. This coincides with the ideals of Southern patriarchal society, in that the man’s honor relies on the honor of the women with whom he associates. This could explain his violent dislike for his sister and his mistreatment of Miss Quentin, as they do not follow his expectations of what a proper Southern woman should be. Jason names those that do not fulfill the idealized role of woman as a ‘bitch,’ “The bitch that cost me a job, the one chance I ever had to get ahead, that killed my father is shortening my mother’s life every day and made my name a laughing stock in the town” (Faulkner *The Sound* 304). He frequently calls both Caddy and Miss Quentin ‘bitch,’ further detaching himself from them, yet accepts his mother because she fits in well with societal morality structures, even when she is a failure as a mother. Her inability to act in her given role is shown in Quentin’s feelings of abandonment: “If I’d just had a mother so I could say Mother Mother” (Faulkner *The Sound* 95). He does not even recognize Mrs. Compson as his mother. Along with being absent in her children’s lives, she fails to be a positive maternal force in the Compson family life. It seems her purpose in the novel, aside from birthing the Compson children, is to perpetuate antiquated gender stereotypes.

With the creation of the mother role comes a need for this role to be filled; Dilsey and Caddy must act in Mrs. Compson’s stead, becoming surrogates and ineffectual substitutes in the eyes of the Compson sons. Dilsey is present throughout the entire novel and is given special attention in the last section, yet remains voiceless and unappreciated in her maternal ministrations: “Section four focuses on Dilsey’s heroic effort to hold together the family's last remnants by her sacrificial assumption of the responsibilities of motherhood to a family that is not her own.” (Page 47-48). Unlike Mrs. Compson, Dilsey is warm and steadfast. Unlike Caddy, Dilsey accepts and continues the role of surrogate mother even after she is not treated like a true member of the family due to her social status. Dilsey’s section is not told from her point of view. The reader gets a clear view of her character, from her actions to dress. In these descriptions, her character is elevated, her clothing even being described as ‘regal’ (Faulkner *The Sound* 265). The contrast in language between her actual utterances and the way in which her section is written might be intended to reveal her importance and quiet, enduring strength. In substituting a third person narrative for her point of view, her perspective and language are taken away in order to portray her in a better light. However, this silences her voice using a narrative constructed by Faulkner, just as Caddy’s and Mrs. Compson’s stories must be told by other male characters in the novel.

The feminine voice is further silenced in *The Sound and the Fury*, as Caddy is presented only from the perspective of her brothers, even though, like Addie, she is central to the novel. Unlike Dilsey, Caddy’s role assumption makes it difficult for her to grow and mature as a woman. It also creates tension and confusion within the family, not only affecting Caddy herself, but her brothers as well: “Faulkner has robbed the mother not just of her voice but her maternity. Because the brothers control the terms of the narrative, Caddy exists as sister rather than mother” (Clarke 21). Though viewed primarily as sister, she becomes a mother to her brothers in everything but name. Caddy, much like the caddies in golf that so trouble Benjy, takes on the burden of others and provides tools for the players in the game, or, in this case, the story told by the male narrators. As a complex woman, Caddy wants to nurture, find love, and leave her family, something Benjy and Quentin have difficulties accepting: “Caddy’s a woman too remember. She must do things for women’s reasons too” (Faulkner *The Sound* 92). She cares for her brothers, yet wants to fulfill her other desires through meeting other men. While Benjy lacks the capability to understand that Caddy assumes multiple roles, simply noticing her changes and absence, but not correlating them to other incidents, the rest of the family recognizes, on a deeper level, the changes taking place. Caddy is restricted because her brothers view her as both sister and mother, yet she is also limited in her actions due to her status as a Southern woman.

In Caddy becoming sexual, she breaks societal norms, causing confusion, anxiety, and a break from her assumed role of chaste sister, pure mother, and dependent, passive Southern woman. Her family cannot accept her multiplicity: “As soon as she begins the natural process of seeking love outside her family, she is faced with a frustrating problem of identity -- the confusion of her real self with the role she has assumed” (Page 52). Caddy loses status in her family due to moral constraints enforced by her mother, resulting in stripping her of her identity as a virtuous woman. She is viewed as fallen; she is also revoked of her sister and mother roles, a sting which is amplified by her disownment, Quentin’s death, Jason’s name calling, Benjy’s institutionalization, and Miss Quentin’s distance. Not only does Caddy’s multiple role assumption and fall from grace result in her brothers’ emotional turmoil, it also causes internal conflicts in Caddy that is only seen through Quentin’s narrative. While she actively seeks out sexual partners, she seems to internalize the misogyny surrounding female sexuality: “There was something terrible in me sometimes at night I could see it grinning at me I could see it through them grinning at me through their faces it's gone now and I'm sick” (Faulkner *The Sound* 112). Similar to Addie’s sexuality being distorted by sin, Caddy finds little fulfillment or joy in her encounters because of the negativity and stigmas surrounding them. Instead, she describes her sexuality as ‘terrible,’ the same word used by Dewey Dell and Addie to describe their pregnancies; the only outcome of Caddy’s sexual expression is being sick and pregnant with an unwanted child. Just as Quentin tries to clear her of her sins by trying to convince their father he committed incest, Caddy may have tried to rid herself of her constant reminder of her misdoings, Miss Quentin, by abandoning her on the doorstep of the Compson household.

While Quentin takes on the role of Caddy’s protector and upholder of traditional values, he also provides the most insight into Caddy’s complexities. Quentin bridges the gap between the traditional Southern masculine perspective and the modern 20th century woman. Caddy is defined by her brothers’ perspectives of her; Jason is wholly misogynistic and traditional, Benjy views her through his simplified perspective, yet Quentin fights internal battles regarding his love for his sister:

We may then come to see her as she moves through Benjy’s world as its creator, the maker of stars, the creator of color and motion and natural beauty. Her willingness to play imaginatively, to become herself a subject-in-process, extends to participation in Quentin’s text of incest and death. From within Quentin’s tortured psyche, she speaks to him of the feminine within himself -- that part of himself he must deny in order to become a man in a patriarchal order. (Gwin 27)

While, to Benjy, Caddy represents life, vivacity, and safety, to Quentin she represents the struggle between masculine and feminine in the context of societal roles and morality. His love for her is both familial and romantic, it seems. He sees himself and his sister as a bonded pair, almost a singular being; he wants to share in her suffering and be condemned to the same fate: “if it could just be a hell beyond that: the clean flame the two of us more than dead. Then you will have only me then only me then the two of us amid the pointing and the horror beyond the clean flame" (Faulkner *The Sound* 116). Caddy becomes integral to Quentin’s identity; in some ways, a duality is created within Quentin, in that he accepts the multi-dimensional Caddy, but, at the same time, rejects her favor of traditional, misogynistic values.

While Quentin is not a woman, his insights into Caddy and his attempts to become the masculine protector, like Jason, make his character all too important in defining Faulkner’s presentation of femininity. The female characters are deemed too precious and incapable of sufficiently protecting themselves, and so must be protected by a male character: “Father and I protect women from one another from themselves our women” (Faulkner *The Sound* 86). This further explains Quentin’s attempts to align himself so closely with Caddy; he is trying to protect her and keep her honor intact because he loves her. He also, perhaps, wants to possess her only for himself and because he must follow his society’s moral code. He presents Caddy the most clearly out of all of the other narrators: “it is through Quentin that we hear Caddie, through him that the feminine can speak” (Roberts 122). Instead of being given the feminine perspective, the reader gets a glimpse into the feminine through Quentin’s masculine perspective. Quentin describes how Caddy broke gender boundaries when she was a child: “she was never a queen or fairy she was always a king or a giant or a general” (Faulkner *The Sound* 173). This foreshadows her break from traditional values later in the novel. In trying to name Caddy the traditional Southern woman, or ‘a lady’ as Mrs. Compson describes herself, she is limited in her experiences and expressions as an individual and a woman. When attempting to revel in her sexuality and norm breaking behavior, she not only causes problems for herself, but for Quentin and the rest of family who are unable to accept her multi-faceted identity.

While the mother role is assumed by Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury*, the sons in *As I Lay Dying* actively shape the maternal in projecting their need for it onto other things, thus invalidating and ignoring the importance of Addie’s death. Dewey Dell has no need of this: “Having buried the mother well before the epic journey begins, Dewey Dell has no need to replace the mother figuratively, for she literally replicates the mother in her own pregnancy” (Clarke 41). She shares the role of mother with Addie, and doesn't have to seek out a mother from her surroundings. In this way, Faulkner shows how women are treated as interchangeable; Caddy can replace Mrs. Compson, just as Dewey Dell can replace Addie. The individual, nuanced woman seems less important to the other characters than filling the vacated role. Cash and Vardaman react in a more complex fashion to their mother’s death: “Unable to articulate their feelings, to transform their doing into language, they cannot yet understand that the mother now has a figurative rather than a literal presence” (Clarke 40). The sons use language to shape their experience and grief, in order to better process it, or at least make sense of it. This is seen most clearly with Vardaman. In processing his mother’s death, he makes analogy to his mother being a slaughtered fish: “My mother is a fish” (Faulkner *As I Lay* 49). Both the fish and mother die, so the parallel situations are used to better understand what occurred in light of no one explaining it to him. While this aids in his understanding, he still rejects his mother in some sense. He becomes confused at her illness and death: “It was not my mother. She went away when the other one laid down in her bed and drew the quilt up” (Faulkner *As I Lay* 39). He rejects recognizing his mother in her physical body; seeing her ill does not coincide with his ideals of what his mother should be. Cash, during her sickness and death, finds solace in building the coffin, and details the construction list in his section after her death instead of mourning her loss (Faulkner *As I Lay* 48). The care and time he takes creating it acts as a replacement for caring for his actual mother. Jewel, unlike Addie’s other sons, finds a surrogate before she even becomes ill.

Instead of reciprocating the maternal love given by his mother, Jewel seeks out independence and growth, not through lovers as Caddy does, but through his horse. In this way, he replaces the love of his mother through purchasing a horse: “Jewel’s mother is a horse” (Faulkner *As I Lay* 55). This could be a metaphor for finding a woman, a lover, as Cash had insinuated, though the effect on his mother would be the same nonetheless. Jewel is named so because he is highly prized, yet, in spite of his external appeal, lacks substance. Addie’s devastation at realizing her prized son had been taking advantage of her care and giving his love to another seems to emotionally distance Jewel, “She cried hard, not hiding her face, standing there in her faded wrapper, looking at him and him on the horse, looking down at her, his face growing cold and a little sick looking, until her looked away quick and Cash came and touched her” (Faulkner *As I Lay* 78). He is repulsed by her emotional outburst, leaving Cash to comfort her. This care shown by Cash does not earn him anything in Addie’s estimation as a mother, just as Darl’s active love does not increase his favor in her eyes. In spite of his abandonment, Jewel remains Addie’s favorite son, because she has ownership over him; he is her son, not Anse’s, a symbol of her power and independence in a world where she is confined to her role. Unlike Vardaman, who uses metaphor to process Addie’s death, Jewel replaces Addie with a horse in order to help shape his identity and find his own independence, seeking a break from the maternal. Anse, in similar fashion to Jewel, easily casts off Addie and quickly replaces his wife with another woman by the novel’s end. Darl, instead of finding a substitute to aid in his grief or individualism, goes mad from its lack: “I have no mother” (Faulkner *As I Lay* 55). Darl is Addie’s son; this relationship is integral to his character and identity, as this was his primary love relationship. In losing this key relationship, as, by definition, one cannot be a son without a parent, he loses a portion of his identity. Just like Quentin, Darl suffers a mental decline because he loses something so utterly important to him and can find no surrogate or replacement in his external world.

The role of women in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* are intrinsic and central to each novel, yet the women themselves are often repressed, having very little prominence in the text. Language is key to the portrayal and identity of woman, yet, in both of these novels, language is often a masculine tool used to control and oppress. Even in Addie’s attempts to rebel against her assigned roles, she still succumbs to masculine language. In Dewey Dell’s acceptance of her femininity, she is still taken advantage of by men. In terms of Caddy and Miss Quentin, the stereotyping and treatment of women who breaks those stereotypes results in the exclusion of them or a retreat from a social group and community. Ultimately, the role given to the female characters is held as more important than the woman’s individual identity, shown in the male characters’ desperate attempts to force the female characters to conform to stereotypes and gender roles.

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